WORKERS VANGUARD

Supplement
13 January 2026

NYSNA Strike
How to Win This Time

WV Photo

Nurses picket at Mount Sinai West hospital on first day of strike, January 12.

Trump kicked off the New Year by uncorking murderous violence—first in Venezuela and then in Minneapolis. His getting away with it virtually unopposed will only embolden the bosses to further squeeze their workers who are already suffering mightily under the weight of inflation and overwork. At this very moment and in the face of worsening conditions for patients and staff alike in New York City hospitals, the NYSNA nurses have stepped up to fight against the monopolies' attacks through historic strike action. A clear win in this battle could be a breakthrough not only for nurses, but also for other healthcare workers, the working class more broadly and the general public who are in need of quality healthcare. This country is clearly headed in the wrong direction, and a ray of hope could make a real difference. The question is: ***what to do?***

NYSNA nurses are ready to fight. But union leaders are following the self-sabotaging script that guided them during the 2023 strike, which they declared a victory after the hospitals agreed to wage increases and concrete staffing ratios. But the bosses never felt compelled to actually maintain those ratios. That's because, despite the nurses' determination and sacrifice, the union tops did not prepare the battle that was needed. They did nothing to draw in active support among hospital and city workers to stop scabs and assert control of hospital operations which would ensure patient safety. Instead, they settled with each hospital individually to such an extent that they only called out nurses at two hospitals, significantly weakening the strike in advance and creating divisions in the ranks. Then, they halted the strike altogether before it could have a real impact.

The bosses, though, learned plenty from 2023. They have not only refused to increase staffing in the years since, but are also demanding new givebacks. They have brought in an army of "replacement nurses" to keep the hospitals up and running as usual. The NYSNA leadership did the nurses no favors by limiting the current strike to only the hospitals with the deepest pockets to defeat the union.

Read *Workers Vanguard*, Marxist newspaper of the Central Committee of the SL/U.S.: workersvanguard.org
Spartacist League/U.S., section of the International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist)
Box 1377 GPO, New York, NY 10116 • (212) 732-7860 • iclfi.org • vanguard@tiac.net • @WorkersVanguard

Chicago: (312) 563-0441
chicagospartacist@sbcglobal.net

Los Angeles: (213) 380-8239
slsycla@sbcglobal.net

New York: (212) 267-1025
nysl@tiac.net

Oakland: (510) 839-0851
slbayarea@fastmail.net

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Even though they are in a weaker spot today than in 2023, the nurses can still come out on top this time around—but only if they organize this strike along very different lines. The NYSNA-endorsed Democratic politicians certainly are not coming to the rescue. Governor Hochul made clear where she stood by declaring a "disaster emergency" that gave the green light to the recruitment of scabs from across the country. The new mayor got in a photo-op on the picket lines, where his words of support to the nurses were betrayed by his promised actions—to assist the bosses in keeping the hospitals open with scab labor in the name of "continuity of care." This should come as no surprise: Mamdani made a big show of keeping on NYPD commissioner Jessica Tisch, whose father is co-chair of the Mt. Sinai Board of Trustees. For all his talk of dignity and respect for nurses, Mamdani himself is now the boss of the city's public hospitals, where pay and conditions are even worse than at the private hospitals.

What to Do

Nurses will have to look elsewhere for real solidarity. Appeals must be made to other nurses, hospital unions and city workers to build mass picket lines that block entrances and deter scabs from crossing. *All* workers have a stake in doing so. A NYSNA victory would give them a boost in their own contract battles and open the door to the kind of fighting alliance of labor needed to withstand the many attacks directed against working people today.

The nurses at hospitals where the NYSNA leadership withdrew strike notices, like the three in the Northwell network on Long Island, should be encouraged to join the strike in order to maximize the union's leverage and win what they deserve. The nurses, who themselves are heavily black, Latino and Asian, have connected the fight to improve their conditions to the fight to improve healthcare for minority communities which have been severely affected by the current slashing of this vital service. But rallying the communities to the pickets would go a long way toward bolstering the strike and fusing the struggles of the unions and the struggles of oppressed groups against the common class enemy.

HOSPITAL WORKERS BUILDING UNION POWER
HWBUP

For information about Hospital Workers Building Union Power, see: linktr.ee/hwbup_nyc

Nurses could also strengthen their position by acting to put an end to the chaos inside the hospitals. The scabs do not know hospital policy or where anything is. They have been lured by big payoffs to help break the strike—and in the process their own licenses and patient care have been put on the line by the bosses. The scabs should be kept outside, and NYSNA and the other unions should establish "continuity of care" by ensuring the cancellation of all elective cases and orderly transfer of others as well as by assigning crews to provide for the health and safety of the remaining patients.

NYSNA has a very powerful potential ally in 1199SEIU. But on the first day of the strike, its leaders were focused on lobbying the bosses' politicians in Albany and going about business as usual in NYC hospitals. They hide behind the no-strike clause in the union contract to justify this betrayal of the nurses—which only undermines their own membership in the looming contract battle with the League. In turn, as NYSNA nurses are aware, the "enforcement mechanism" of fining the hospitals does not work to fundamentally improve conditions. The only way for the union to be able to beat back the bosses and keep them to their word is to retain the strike weapon at all times. Nurses could show the way for 1199 workers by refusing any agreement containing a no-strike clause.

Trump and the bosses have demonstrated that they are not restrained in any way by their own rules whenever it suits their class interests. Union leaders who insist on following these rules to the letter are handcuffing the membership and setting it up for defeat. Nurses and their working-class allies must join forces to put this strike on a course that can win. Hospital Workers Building Union Power is one group of union militants looking to do just that. ■